

# The Role of Power in Nonviolent Struggle

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# THE ROLE OF POWER IN NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE

by Gene Sharp

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## Introduction

Nonviolent struggle is based upon the very nature of power in society and politics. The practice, dynamics, and consequences of nonviolent struggle are all directly dependent upon the wielding of power and its effects on the power of the opponent group. This technique cannot be understood without consideration of this important element in its nature.

This perception is in direct contradiction to the popular misconceptions that nonviolent action is powerless, that it conceptually and politically ignores the reality of power in politics, and that its advocates are naive in not accepting that violence is the real source of power in politics. These misconceptions, however, are themselves rooted in a denial or ignoring of the nature of power in politics and the crucial role of power in the operation of nonviolent struggle.

Nonviolent struggle is a political technique that needs to be understood in its own right, not explained or assessed by an assumption of its close association or identity with quite different phenomena. This technique of action uses social, psychological, economic, and political methods of applying sanctions, that is, pressures or punishments, rather than violent methods.<sup>1</sup> The technique includes nearly two hundred identified methods of symbolic protest, social noncooperation, economic boycotts, labor strikes, political noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention (ranging from sit-ins to parallel govern-

ment). These many methods are also called the "weapons" of nonviolent action.

The nonviolent technique is not to be confused with the important but separate phenomena of religious and ethical beliefs that espouse abstention from violence.<sup>2</sup> Those beliefs *may* be shared by the same persons or movement using nonviolent action. However, far more frequently the practice of nonviolent struggle has been conducted by people and movements that lacked a principled commitment to nonviolent means. They had previously used violence or would be willing to do so in the future in other circumstances. Under the current conditions, however, people were willing to follow a grand strategy of nonviolent struggle for a particular purpose. They were willing to use these nonviolent weapons in place of violence, and to maintain nonviolent discipline, even though they were not committed to those means in other possible situations. The overwhelming reason for this choice of nonviolent means in conflicts has been that reliance on this type of struggle would increase the chances of their being successful in the current conflict.

Nonviolent struggle is a technique of matching forces against an opponent group. The opponent group usually has significant administrative, economic, political, police, and military capacity. The opponent group is commonly itself the State apparatus, controlled by an elite that is seen as hostile and injurious to the welfare and interests of a wider population. Or, the opponent group is frequently a non-state body that is backed by the State apparatus.

The broad population that feels itself to be negatively affected by a policy or action of the opponent group may be called the "grievance group." This body may be concerned with limited issues, a broad policy, or may even repudiate the whole regime. The group actually participating in nonviolent struggle is smaller than the general grievance group, although the size of the population and the number and types of institutions that participate in the nonviolent struggle will vary widely.

Power is an integral part of nonviolent struggles. These conflicts cannot be understood or waged intelligently without attention to power capacities and power relationships. "Power" is used here to mean the totality of all influences and pressures, including sanctions, available to a group or society for use in maintaining itself, implementing its policies, and conducting internal and external conflicts.

Power may be measured by relative ability to control a situation, people, and institutions, or to mobilize people and institutions for some activity. Such power may be used to enable a group to achieve a goal; to implement or change policies; to induce others to behave as the wielders of power wish; to oppose or to maintain the established system, policies, and relationships; to alter, destroy, or replace the prior power distribution or institutions; or to accomplish a combination of these.

Political power may be possessed by governments, the State, institutions, opposition movements, and other groups. Such power may be directly applied, or may be a reserve capacity, having influence merely by its existence. For example, power is present in negotiations as well as in war.

In order to understand the role of power in nonviolent struggles it is necessary to look at the nature and dynamics of the power available both to the opponent group and to the nonviolent group.

### **Dependent Rulers**

It is an obvious, simple, but often forgotten observation of great theoretical and practical significance that the power wielded by individuals and groups in the highest political positions of command and decision in any government—whom we shall for the sake of brevity call “rulers”—is not intrinsic to them. Such power must come from outside themselves. The political power that they wield as rulers comes from the society which they govern. Thus, if persons are to wield power as rulers, they must be able to direct the behavior of other people, draw on large resources (human and material), wield an apparatus of sanctions, and direct a bureaucracy in the administration of their policies.

The rulers of governments and political systems are not omnipotent, nor do they possess self-generating power. All dominating elites and rulers depend for their sources of power upon the cooperation of the population and of the institutions of the society they would rule. The availability of those sources depends on the cooperation and obedience of many groups and institutions, special personnel, and the general population.

Political power appears to emerge from the interaction of all or

several of the following sources:

(1) *Authority*. The extent and intensity of the rulers' authority or legitimacy among the subjects.

(2) *Human resources*. The number of persons who obey, cooperate, or provide special assistance, their proportion in the population, and the extent and forms of their organizations.

(3) *Skills and knowledge*. The skills, knowledge, and abilities of such persons, and their capacity to supply the needs of the ruler.

(4) *Intangible factors*. Psychological and ideological factors, such as habits and attitudes toward obedience and submission, and the presence or absence of a common faith, ideology, or sense of mission.

(5) *Material resources*. Property, natural resources, financial resources, the economic system, means of communication, and transportation.

(6) *Sanctions*. The type and extent of pressures and punishments available for rulers to use against their own subjects and in conflicts with other rulers.

It is almost always a matter of *degree* to which some or all of these sources of power are present; only rarely, if ever, are all of them completely available to rulers or completely absent. Their availability is subject to constant variation, however, which brings about an increase or decrease in the rulers' power. The degree of the rulers' power is determined by the extent to which there is unrestricted access to these sources.

A closer examination of the sources of the rulers' power indicates that they depend *intimately* upon the obedience and cooperation of the governed. If the subjects reject the rulers' right to rule and to command, they are withdrawing the general agreement, or group consent, that makes the existing government possible. This loss of authority sets in motion the disintegration of the rulers' power. That power is reduced to the degree that the rulers are denied authority. Where the loss is extreme, the existence of that particular government is threatened.

Denial of authority leads to restriction or refusal of cooperation. This is serious for any regime because by their cooperation the subjects contribute to the operation and perpetuation of the established system. Both the economic and the political systems operate because of the contributions of many people, individuals, organizations, and subgroups, and the rulers are dependent on their cooperation and

assistance. The more extensive and detailed the rulers' control is, the more such assistance they will require.

The rulers' power depends on the continual availability of all this assistance, not only from individual members, officials, employees and the like, but also from the subsidiary organizations and institutions, which comprise the system as a whole. These may be departments, bureaus, branches, committees, and the like. However, these individuals, groups, and institutions may refuse to cooperate, and may decline to provide sufficient assistance to maintain effectively the rulers' position and enable them to implement their policies.

### **Limits of Enforcement**

In the face of widespread noncooperation and disobedience, if the rulers do not make significant concessions they will have to place increased reliance on enforcement. In efforts to ensure the needed degree of assistance and cooperation, the rulers may apply sanctions (or punishments). Such sanctions are usually possible because very often while one section of the populace rejects the rulers' authority another section often remains loyal and is willing to carry out their policies. Loyal police and soldiers can be used to inflict sanctions on the remainder of the people.

That is not the whole story, however. The ruling group (foreign or domestic) will itself still be united by something other than sanctions, and therefore vulnerable to other influences. Furthermore, the ability of rulers to apply sanctions at home or abroad arises from and depends upon a significant degree of help from the subjects themselves, which can be restricted or refused. Also, rulers need more than grudging, outward forms of compliance by the population and the multitude of helpers they require. However, efforts to obtain this assistance by compulsion will inevitably be inadequate as long as the rulers' authority is limited.

Sanctions *are* important in maintaining the political power of rulers—especially in crises. However, whether those sanctions are effective depends on the response of the subjects against whom they are threatened or applied. In many situations people have, as do soldiers regularly in wars, refused to retreat in face of dangers. Even in the case of sanctions, there is a role for an act of will, for choice. To



be effective, the sanction must be *feared* and the people must become willing once more to cooperate and obey. They may, however, not do so. If they do not, then the power relationship remains uncompleted and the rulers' power is threatened fundamentally.

### Corporate Resistance

The availability of each of the sources of power is, then, related to, or directly dependent upon, the degree of cooperation, submission, obedience, and assistance that the rulers are able to obtain from their subjects and the institutions of the society. That dependence makes it possible, under certain circumstances, for the subjects to restrict or sever these sources of power, by reducing or withdrawing their necessary cooperation and obedience.

If the rulers' power is to be controlled by withdrawing help and obedience, the noncooperation and disobedience must be widespread. These must, in addition, be maintained in the face of repression aimed at forcing a resumption of submission. Once, however, there has been a major reduction of, or an end to, the subjects' fear, and once there is a willingness to suffer sanctions as the price of change, large-scale disobedience and noncooperation become possible. Such action then becomes politically significant. The rulers' will is thwarted in proportion to the number of disobedient subjects, the extent of noncooperating institutions, and to the degree of the rulers' dependence upon them. The answer to the problem of apparently uncontrollable power may, therefore, lie in learning how to carry out and maintain such withdrawal of cooperation.

If the withdrawal of acceptance, cooperation, and obedience can be maintained in the face of the rulers' punishments, then the end of the regime is in sight. Thus, all rulers are dependent for their positions and political power upon the cooperation of their subjects. The theory that power derives from violence, and that victory necessarily goes to the side with the greater capacity for violence, is false. Instead, the will to defy and the capacity to resist become central.

If this insight into the dependent nature of political power is to be implemented, the question is *how*. The lack of knowledge of what to do has been one reason why people have not more often acted effectively on this insight and, long since, abolished tyranny and oppres-

sion. Two of the components of implementation are clear. First, the citizens' rejection of the tyrannical government must be actively expressed in a refusal to cooperate. This refusal may take many forms, as we shall see. Second, there must be group or mass action. When the ruling minority is unified but the ruled majority lacks independent organization, the subjects are usually incapable of corporate opposition. They can be dealt with one by one. Effective action based on this theory of power requires *corporate* resistance and defiance.

### The Structural Basis

The structural condition of the society is therefore highly important in determining the general capacity of a society to control its rulers. This structural condition refers to the existence of various institutions (or *loci* of power). These are bodies or institutions in the society where power is located, converges, or is expressed.

The precise form and nature of *loci* of power vary from society to society and from situation to situation. They are, however, likely to include such social groups and institutions as families, social classes, religious groups, cultural and nationality groups, occupational groups, economic groups, villages and towns, cities, provinces and regions, smaller governmental bodies, voluntary organizations, and political parties. Most often the *loci* are traditional, established, formal social groups and institutions. Sometimes, however, *loci* of power may be less formally organized, and may even be recently created or revitalized in the process of achieving some objective or of opposing the ruler.

Their status as *loci* will be determined by their capacity to act independently, to wield effective power, and to regulate the effective power of others, such as the rulers, or of some other *locus* or *loci* of power. Their numbers, the degree of their centralization or decentralization, their internal decision-making processes, and the degree of their internal strength and vitality are all then very important.

The society's power structure, that is, these relationships, in the long run determines the sphere and the degree of the rulers' maximum effective power. When power is effectively diffused throughout the society among such *loci*, the rulers' power is most likely subjected to controls and limits because such bodies provide the capacity for

resistance to governmental control. This condition is associated with political "freedom." When, on the other hand, such *loci* have been seriously weakened, effectively undermined, or have had their independent existence and autonomy of action destroyed by some type of superimposed controls, the rulers' power is most likely to be uncontrolled. The ability for corporate resistance is then drastically weakened or destroyed. This is associated with "tyranny."

The condition of the society's *loci* of power will in large degree determine the long-run capacity of the society to control the rulers' power. A society in which groups and institutions exist which possess significant social power and are capable of independent action is more capable of controlling the rulers' power, and thus of resisting tyranny, than a society in which the subjects are all equally impotent because there are no groups through which the populace can act together to gain objectives and to resist the ruler.

The sources of the rulers' power are normally only threatened significantly when assistance, cooperation, and obedience are withheld by large numbers of subjects at the same time, usually by social groups and institutions. The ability of such bodies to withhold the sources of power they supply is then pivotal. That ability will be influenced by various factors, including the subjects' skill in applying the technique of struggle by noncooperation, and also the rulers' relative need for the sources of power that the subjects and their institutions may provide. Important, too, is the degree to which these groups possess the capacity to act independently against the ruler.

The capacity of the society's non-State institutions to control the rulers' actions will, then, be influenced by (1) the relative desire of the populace to control their power; (2) the number of the subjects' independent organizations and institutions; (3) the organizations' relative strengths and the degree of their independence of action; (4) the sources of power institutions control; (5) the amount of social power which they can independently wield or control; and (6) the subjects' relative ability to withhold their consent and assistance. If these factors are all present to a high degree, the *loci* may choose to make freely available the sources of power needed by the rulers, or instead they may choose to restrict or sever the sources that the rulers require.

The variations in the rulers' power are therefore directly or indirectly associated with the willingness of the subjects to accept the rulers, and to obey them, cooperate with them, and carry out their wishes.

## **Dissolving the Power of Rulers**

When people refuse their cooperation, withhold help, and persist in their disobedience and defiance, they are denying their opponent the basic human assistance and cooperation that any government or hierarchical system requires. Subjects may disobey laws they reject. Workers may halt work, which may paralyze the economy. The bureaucracy may refuse to carry out instructions. Soldiers and police may become lax in inflicting repression; they may even mutiny. If people and institutions do this in sufficient numbers for long enough, that government or hierarchical system will no longer have power. The persons who have been "rulers" become simply ordinary people. Everything is changed because the human assistance that created and supported the regime's political power has been withdrawn. Therefore, its power has dissolved.

Generalized obstinacy and collective stubbornness are not enough, however, to wield effective power against entrenched rulers. General opposition must be translated into a strategy of action. People will need to understand the technique based on this insight into power, including the specific methods of that technique, its dynamics of change, requirements for success, and principles of strategy and tactics. The implementation must be skillful. This includes knowing how to persist despite repression. We need, therefore, to understand more fully the technique of nonviolent action—which is built on this insight into power.

## **A Nonviolent Weapons System**

Nonviolent action is a means of combat, as is war. It involves the matching of forces and the waging of "battles," requires wise strategy and tactics, and demands of its "soldiers" courage, discipline, and sacrifice. (The casualty rates, however, are usually much lower than in conventional or guerrilla wars.) People seeking victory by nonviolent struggle need to increase their basic strength, to apply skillfully their chosen technique of action, and to fulfill its requirements for success to the maximum of their capacity. Although it is widely assumed that nonviolent action must always take longer to succeed than violent struggle, this is not necessarily so. It has at times succeeded within weeks or even days.

The many methods of nonviolent action can be viewed as limited implementations of the theory of power presented above. Three broad classes of nonviolent weapons exist within the technique of nonviolent struggle: nonviolent protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention. These "weapons" of nonviolent struggle can change the selected social, economic, or political relationships, and can at times alter fundamentally the balance of forces.

*Nonviolent protest and persuasion* is a class of mainly symbolic actions of peaceful opposition or of attempted persuasion, extending beyond verbal expressions but stopping short of noncooperation or nonviolent intervention. Among these methods are parades, vigils, picketing, posters, teach-ins, mourning, and protest meetings.

By far the largest class of methods of nonviolent action involves *noncooperation* with the opponent. Noncooperation entails the deliberate discontinuance, withholding, or defiance of certain existing relationships—social, economic, or political. The action may be spontaneous or planned, legal or illegal.

The methods of noncooperation are divided into three categories: (1) methods of *social noncooperation* (including social boycotts); (2) methods of *economic noncooperation* (subdivided into economic boycotts and strikes); and (3) methods of *political noncooperation* (also known as political boycotts). The capacity of the nonviolent struggle group to wield the weapons of noncooperation—social, economic, or political—is of extreme importance in the dynamics of a particular nonviolent struggle.

The third class of the methods of nonviolent action is that of nonviolent intervention. These methods *intervene* in the situation and disrupt or basically change it in some way. They include fasts, sit-ins, nonviolent obstruction, the establishment of new social patterns, stay-in strikes, alternative economic institutions, the seeking of imprisonment, work-on without collaboration, and parallel government.

## Wielding Power

Nonviolent action wields power, both to counter the power of an opponent group, and to advance the objectives of the nonviolent group. By striking at the sources of the opponents' power, the nonviolent technique may be viewed as operating more *directly* than does

political violence. For example, if the issues at stake are primarily economic, the resistance can be economic. If the issues are political, and the opponents require the political cooperation of the population, the resistance, too, can be political. Instead of striking indirectly at the opponents' military forces, which are the outward expression of the opponents' power, the nonviolent sanctions strike directly at the sources of that power: cooperation and obedience. For example, massive strikes can paralyze the economy and large-scale mutinies can dissolve the army.

The technique of nonviolent action may also be viewed as striking at the opponents' power more *indirectly* than does violence. Instead of confronting the opponents' police, troops, and the like with forces of the same type, the nonviolent struggle group counters them indirectly. This operates to undermine the opponent while helping the resisters to mobilize increased strength and support for their cause. For example, by responding to repression nonviolently instead of by counter-violence, the nonviolent resisters may demonstrate that the opponents' repression is incapable of cowing the populace. Their continued resistance while maintaining nonviolent discipline may cause the opponents' usual supporters to become alienated from the rulers, hence weakening their relative power position. The numbers of resisters may grow, and support for them may also increase significantly. (This process is discussed more fully below.) All this may happen because the opponents' violence is countered indirectly instead of violently.

The whole course of the conflict will be highly influenced by the strategy and tactics applied by the nonviolent struggle group. They need, therefore, to plan their strategy with extreme thoughtfulness and care, drawing upon the best available resources about strategic principles and their own knowledge of nonviolent struggle and the conflict situation.

## **Repression**

The challenge by nonviolent action may be a mild one and disturb the *status quo* only slightly. In extreme cases, however, the challenge may shatter it.

The opponents' difficulties in coping with nonviolent action are

associated with the special dynamics and mechanisms of the technique. These tend to maximize the influence and power of the non-violent group while undermining those of the opponents. Their difficulties do not depend on being surprised by the nonviolence or on unfamiliarity with the technique.

Repression is a likely response. Repression can be applied with such means as censorship, confiscation of funds and property, severance of communications, economic pressures, arrests, imprisonments, conscription, concentration camps, use of *agents provocateurs*, threats of future punishment, beatings, shootings, torture, martial law, executions, or retaliation against others. The amount and type of repression will vary with a variety of factors. Because repression may be counterproductive to the opponents' cause, the repression against nonviolent action may be significantly more limited than that applied against a violent rebellion, guerrilla warfare, or conventional war.

The likelihood of violent repression is strong evidence that non-violent action can pose a real threat to the established order. This is a confirmation of, and tribute to, the power of the technique. Repression and even brutalities are no more reason for abandoning nonviolent action than is the enemy's military action in a war seen as a reason to abandon one's own military action. Nonviolent action is designed to operate against opponents who are able and willing to use violent sanctions.

### Combative Nonviolent Discipline

Contrary to what might be expected, repression will not necessarily produce submission. For sanctions to be effective, they must operate on the minds of the subjects, producing fear and the willingness to obey. Just as in war, however, there is the possibility that planning and discipline, or some overriding loyalty or objective, will cause the nonviolent struggle group to persist despite the dangers. The nonviolent group in this situation needs to maintain nonviolent discipline to gain increased control over the opponents, reduce the violence against itself, and increase its chances of winning. To have the best chance of success, the nonviolent group must stick with its chosen technique.

An extensive, determined, and skillful application of nonviolent action will cause the opponents very special problems, which will

disturb or frustrate the effective use of their own forces. The nonviolent struggle group will then be able to throw its opponents off balance politically, causing their repression to undermine their support and weaken their power.

Faced with repression, the nonviolent resisters, if they have the strength, must persist and refuse to submit or retreat. There are in history many examples of groups defying overwhelming violence, both violently and nonviolently. The nonviolent struggle group must defy repression. This response continues the noncooperation and avoids the trap of shifting to fight with the opponents' chosen weaponry (in the possession and use of which the grievance group is inferior). Nonviolent discipline also facilitates the process of "political jiu-jitsu" which can shift power relationships significantly (as discussed below). News of brutalities may eventually leak out despite censorship, and harsher repression may increase, rather than reduce, hostility and resistance to the regime. The violence of such repression can alienate support for the opponent and increase support for the nonviolent resisters.

The maintenance of nonviolent discipline in the face of repression is not an act of moralistic naiveté. Instead, it contributes to success and is a prerequisite for advantageous changes in the distribution of power. Nonviolent discipline can only be compromised at the severe risk of contributing to defeat.

### **Political Jiu-Jitsu**

By remaining nonviolent while continuing the struggle, the nonviolent group will help improve its own power position in several ways. As cruelties to nonviolent people increase, the opponents' regime may appear still more despicable, and sympathy and support for the nonviolent side may increase. The general population may become more alienated from the opponents' regime and more likely to join the resistance. Third parties may increase support for the victims of the repression and opposition to the opponents' violence and policies. Although the effect of national and international public opinion varies, it may rally to the support of the nonviolent resisters, and may at times lead to significant political and economic pressures. The opponents' own citizens, agents, and troops, disturbed by the brutalities



against nonviolent people, may begin to doubt the justice of the policies. Their initial uneasiness may grow into internal dissent and at times even into noncooperation and disobedience in their own camp, such as strikes and mutinies. Thus repression of nonviolent resisters can rebound against the opponents. This is "political *jiu-jitsu*" at work.

### Power Changes

To a degree which has never been adequately appreciated, the nonviolent technique operates by producing power changes. This happens as the result of several factors. The process of political *jiu-jitsu* has a very significant influence on the potential growth of the power of the nonviolent struggle group and the potential shrinking of the power of the opponents.

The nonviolent struggle group can seek continually to increase its strength. It will usually gain growing support and participation from the grievance group. The nature of nonviolent action makes it possible for the resisters to win considerable support for their cause among third parties and even among the opponents' population and aides. The potential for recruiting such support is far greater than in violent struggles. The ability to gain these types of support gives the nonviolent group a capacity, directly and indirectly, to influence—and at times to regulate—the *opponents'* power, by reducing or severing its sources, as discussed above. The ways this occurs will differ from case to case; the pattern in an intra-societal conflict will differ from that in a conflict with a foreign occupation regime—whose power bases of administration and enforcement agents largely lie outside the country. The process is, however, generally applicable in both situations.

The size of the resistance group may therefore vary widely within a single conflict. At times the population and numbers of institutions participating in the struggle will grow or shrink dramatically. Similarly, the supporters of the opponent group and the extent of their institutional support can increase or decrease to an extreme degree during the conflict. Those shifts will be influenced, directly and indirectly, by the actions and behavior of the nonviolent struggle group, among other factors. Frequently, power relationships will also

be influenced by third parties, which may shift away from positions of indifference or neutrality to support or oppose one side or the other.

The course of a nonviolent struggle is likely to cause, and to reflect, shifts in the power capacity of each side and the relative power of each in comparison with the other. The power of each of the contending groups can change continuously, rapidly, and extremely during the course of the struggle. These shifts do not seem to have a parallel in conflicts in which both sides use violence.

Usually the results of these complex changes in the absolute and relative power positions of the contenders will determine the struggle's final outcome.

### Four Mechanisms of Change

Despite the variations from one case of nonviolent action to another, it is possible to distinguish four general "mechanisms" of change that operate in nonviolent action. These are *conversion*, *accommodation*, *non-violent coercion*, and *disintegration*.

In conversion, the opponent, as a result of the actions of the nonviolent group, adopts the point of view of the nonviolent group and accepts that the group's goals are good. Conversion occurs only occasionally.

In the mechanism of accommodation, the opponents are neither converted nor nonviolently coerced; yet elements of either or both are involved in their decision to grant concessions to the nonviolent struggle group. In accommodation, the opponents grant demands, all or more usually some, without fundamentally changing their minds about the issues. The opponents do this because they calculate that it is the best they can do. Their aim may be to undercut internal dissension, minimize losses, avoid a larger disaster, or save face. This appears to be the most common mechanism.

Accommodation is therefore similar to nonviolent coercion and disintegration, in that these mechanisms bring success by changing *the social, economic, or political situation* and the grievance group itself by nonviolent action, rather than changing the opponent, as does conversion. Basic power relationships are changed so as to alter the entire picture.

The third mechanism, nonviolent coercion, can gain the grievance

group's objectives and produce success against the will of the opponent. Nonviolent action becomes coercive when the struggle group succeeds, directly or indirectly, in withholding to a major degree the necessary sources of the opponents' power. Nonviolent coercion may be produced when the opponents' will is blocked. This may occur because (1) the defiance has become too widespread and massive to be controlled by repression; (2) the system is paralyzed; or (3) the opponents' ability to apply repression and implement policies has been drastically undermined by widespread mutiny of soldiers and police, large-scale refusal of assistance by the bureaucracy, or massive withdrawal of authority and support by the populace. Yet the opponents retain some power and continue to exist as a body, able to capitulate or survive the imposed changes.

Disintegration, the fourth mechanism, occurs when the sources of power to the opponents are so completely severed or dissolved that they simply fall apart as a viable group. No coherent body remains, even to accept defeat. The opponents' power has been simply dissolved.

### Removing the Sources of Power

Nonviolent action may reduce the availability of each of the sources of political power in the following ways:

(1) *Authority*. The nonviolent challenge to the opponents offers a clear demonstration of the degree to which their authority is *already* undermined. The struggle may help to alienate from the opponents more people who have previously supported them. At times there will be a clear transfer of loyalty from the opponents to another authority, even a rival parallel government.

(2) *Human resources*. Widespread nonviolent action may also reduce or sever the human resources necessary to the opponents' political power, by withholding the general obedience and cooperation of the masses of subjects who maintain and operate the system. The sheer numerical multiplication of noncooperating, disobedient, and defiant members of the grievance group creates severe enforcement problems for the opponents. The opponents' traditional supporters may at times withdraw their previous support, thereby reducing the opponents' power further.

The withdrawal of human resources will also affect other needed

sources of power (skills, knowledge, and material resources). Thus the opponents require greater power at the very time that their enforcement capacity is being reduced. If the resistance grows while the opponents' power weakens, eventually the regime may become powerless.

(3) *Skills and knowledge.* Certain people or groups possess special skills or knowledge of particular importance; these include special administrators, officials, technicians, and advisors. Withdrawal of their assistance disproportionately weakens the rulers' power. In addition to outright refusal, reduced or deliberately incompetent assistance may also be important.

(4) *Intangible factors.* Habits of obedience and loyalty to authority may be threatened by widespread nonviolent action.

(5) *Material resources.* Nonviolent action may reduce or sever the supply of material resources to the opponents: control of the economic system, transportation, means of communication, financial resources, raw materials, and the like.

(6) *Sanctions.* Even the opponents' ability to apply sanctions may on occasion be negatively influenced by nonviolent action. Their supply of military armaments may be threatened by a foreign country's refusal to sell them, or by strikes in the munitions factories and transportation system. In some cases the numbers of agents of repression—police and troops—may be curtailed as the number of volunteers declines and potential conscripts refuse duty. Police and troops may carry out orders inefficiently or may refuse them completely, potentially leading to nonviolent coercion or disintegration of the opponents as a viable group.

The most significant long-run results of the struggle are likely to be its impact on the resolution of the issues at stake, on the attitudes of the groups toward each other, and on the distribution of power between and within the contending groups. In all these respects the contributions of nonviolent struggle are highly significant.

## **Changes in the Struggle Group**

Participation in nonviolent action is likely to have several important effects on the people taking part. For example, as people learn about and experience this technique of action, they may gain increased self-respect, enhanced self-confidence in their ability to influence the

course of events, general reduction of fear and submissiveness, and greater awareness of their own power. In common with experience in other types of conflict, the group using nonviolent action tends to gain greater unity, internal cooperation, and solidarity. However, there also appear to be special qualities in nonviolent action that contribute to these results.

The non-state institutions of the society (*loci* of power) that have been the social bases for resistance are likely to have been strengthened. The population will therefore have in the future strong structural bases for resistance in crises. The struggle is also likely to have taught the participants how to struggle effectively against apparently overwhelming forces of administration and violent repression. The result is likely to be a growth of popular empowerment which may have significant long-term effects.

### Political Relevance

Nonviolent action is possible, and is capable of wielding great power even against ruthless rulers and military regimes, because it attacks the most vulnerable characteristic of all hierarchical institutions and governments: dependence on the governed. If, despite repression, the sources of power can be restricted, withheld, or severed for sufficient time, the result may be the paralysis of the political system and the impotence of the regime. In severe cases, the rulers' power will progressively die, slowly or rapidly, from political starvation.

This insight into political power, and the cross-cultural use of nonviolent sanctions based upon it, demonstrate that nonviolent struggle is not restricted by cultural or national boundaries. It is, therefore, potentially relevant to the problems of liberation, international aggression, and internal usurpation in all parts of the world.

## NOTES

1. See Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 3 vols. Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973. The present paper is abstracted from this extensive three volume examination of the technique of nonviolent action. For those interested in a more thorough exposition of the topic, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* can be ordered from Porter Sargent Publishers, 11 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108, USA.

2. See Gene Sharp, "Types of Principled Nonviolence" in *Gandhi as a Political Strategist, with Essays on Ethics and Politics*, pp. 201-234. Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1979.